

Long Pants

BY JAMES OPPENHEIM

WHEN Edward opened sleepy eyes on the morning of Sept. 25, 1898, he was dimly aware of a gray wind grieving about the little frame house, shadows flying on the white walls, and an exquisite smell of burning leaves. Dreamily he longed to go on some perilous adventure through stripped woods and remote mountain flumes; something wild in the autumn evoked something wild in his boy-heart, telling him plainly that he belonged to the outdoor earth. Then all at once he saw the stout, shiny-black shoulders of his mother, and got a glimpse of her flabby face. He was shocked to see tears trickling on her cheek.

"Edward, . . . congratulate. . . . You're a big boy now."

Her moist lips indented his cool cheek. Impulsively he embraced her, wanting to sob himself. Yes, it was his birthday, and he was fourteen years old! His mother kissed him three times, and repeating "big boy" over and over, left the room. He could not divine, of course, that she was kissing her child good-by, that the baby that had been her very own from the first throb in her side through all the startling years of growth was now definitely sundered from her, to go his own way in forgetfulness. He had ceased to be hers: he now belonged to himself.

Yet some of this feeling of independence invaded him while he dressed; he was deliciously conscious of maturity, the putting away of childish things, the sense of stepping into the world. Hence his elder sister angered him when she called mockingly through the door:

"Congratulations, kid. I suppose you think you're a whole lot, now you're fourteen."

But Fanny had always been contemptuous. It was the price he paid for not being born ahead of her.

Retaining his dignity with effort, he went down the stairs to the dining-room.

As he expected, his dry little father—the fifty-year-old express-company clerk—was sitting at table, with newspaper at the right and coffee and eggs before him. Old Ferguson's hair was just turning gray over his puckered, small-eyed face. One ink-stained hand grasped the newspaper, the other stirred the coffee with a spoon.

Edward stood a moment uncertainly, an awkward, lean boy, spare-faced, brown-haired, in short trousers he had outgrown. He and his father had few words for each other; they were natural antagonists, the youth adventurous, the man mechanical.

Yet this morning Old Ferguson looked up consciously and shyly smiled. Then he tentatively held out a hand, and Edward, grinning uneasily, had to offer his own.

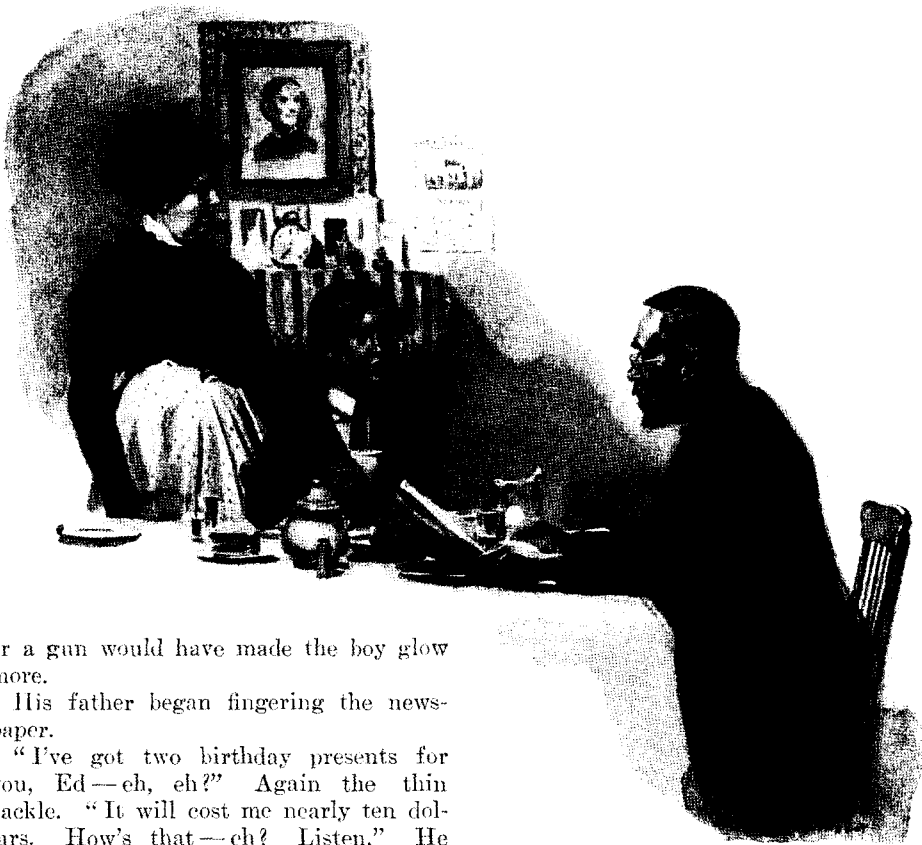
"I congratulate you, Ed. Come on, come on, sit down."

A note of excitement in his father's voice set his heart pounding. He took the seat, and sat stiffly, his cheeks burning. He had not expected a present, and yet such things have been, could be again in a world of daily miracles. Subtly he felt that his father was struggling with supreme emotions and a native inability to express his thoughts.

The old man began rubbing his hands together.

"Ed," he said, dryly, "you're fourteen now, not a child any more—eh, eh?" He loosed a thin cackle of laughter. "Your mother and I have been talking together. You've had as much schooling as I, which is as much as a fellow ought to have. The best schooling comes from fighting your own way. When I was fourteen I got five dollars a week, and look at me now! I'm making thirty-five dollars."

Edward felt as if he would choke, but so did his father. From the elder to the younger a great fact was transmitted; namely, that another man was to be added to civilization. And yet a silver watch



or a gun would have made the boy glow more.

His father began fingering the newspaper.

"I've got two birthday presents for you, Ed—eh, eh?" Again the thin cackle. "It will cost me nearly ten dollars. How's that—eh? Listen." He pressed his forefinger down on a large black-faced advertisement: "Sacrifice Sale of Suits; Positively Closing Out; Exceptional Values for Exceptional Men; Stokes & Co., Broadway and Chambers Street." He ran his finger down the page. "Here it is. Listen. 'Trousers; we have a small lot of English grays, blacks, and pepper-and-salt. To those who come early, \$4.75.'"

Edward gasped. He could not seize on the thrilling fact that was knocking at his brain. His father looked up and laughed:

"Your first pair of long pants, Edward. How's that—eh?"

Then Edward laughed, too. Now he was actually a man; now, by plunging his thin legs into cylinders of cloth, he was veritably stepping into manhood. There was no denying his ended childhood.

His father, with smothered excitement, turned the pages of the paper, found another advertisement.

"YOU'RE TO TAKE A JOB, EDWARD, AND BE A MAN"

"That's one present—here's the other." He spoke like a man making over a fortune to his son. "Listen. . . 'Atwood's, Brain-Brokers. We find the right Man for the right Job. Are you hiring Brains? Come to us.' Edward, how's that—eh?"

Edward murmured timidly, "I don't know."

"Employment agency, Ed, best in the city; costs five dollars down, 10 per cent. of first year's salary. Of course"—he tried to speak in an offhand manner, but his excitement leaked through—"I could get you in at the express company, but it's better for a boy to stand on his own feet—fight his own way. You're to take a job, Edward, and be a man."

They gazed a moment at each other, the soul of each betrayed by the dilated eyes. His father's soul was saying, "You are on my level now, my job with

you is done." Edward's was saying, "This monument has revolutionized my life." The candor was too much for both; Edward blushed, his father sought his newspaper, and spoke gruffly:

"Hurry up now with breakfast. You're to come down-town with me."

They walked down the little Brooklyn back street, and took a crowded car at the corner; they had to stand, hanging onto the straps. And Edward felt as the young Indian must feel when for the first time he hunts with the tribe. Instead of trudging lazily through the streets to school, a part of the humdrum domestication of the stay-at-homes, the women, the babies, and the markets, he had joined the adventurous morning rush to the fighting city. He, too, was to have his place in the red struggle of civilization, be part of the ever-recurring newness, risk, and previsioned creation of the future. He belonged to this routine of the cars now: the population in transit drawn by the irresistible suction of necessity; their awakening all over the city by alarm-clocks and patient mothers, their speeded breakfast, their newspapers, their crowded ride, their appointed place in the machinery of the world's work, the work by which the human world moves and grows from day to day.

His father handed him a part of the newspaper, but he did not read. Instead, as the car slowly ascended the incline of Brooklyn Bridge, he looked out eagerly at the busy white-plumed ferries and harbor-craft with their bristling background of the sky-scraper city. The heavens were gray, the river a wet gray sheet, and the tiers of towers sent window-shafts of yellow light into the gray atmosphere. Edward thrilled at the thought of entering that Forbidden City. Was not his passport the reaching of the working age?

Then a black stream of people bore them swiftly over City Hall Park to mingle with the turbulent main current of Broadway, and they entered the crowded floor of Stokes & Co. And Edward went in a school-boy and came out a raw recruit of industrialism. It was very simple, but unbelievably profound. Somehow the adventure ceased

to thrill, the initiation appalled him. For he knew now that he had legs, and that everybody else knew he had legs. He felt like a Centaur, human only from the waist up, a monstrous beast below. But, more than that, he had an inkling that he had put his legs not only into long trousers but also into the confines of a treadmill that would never release him.

His discomfiture was increased by the Brain-Brokers. These gentlemen did business on the fourth floor of an office building, and were reached by an elevator. The narrow entrance-hall, lighted, was lined on either side by young men who took Edward's measure so visibly and audibly that he was merely a pair of pants slouching among them. Then a brisk boy ushered father and son into the electric-lit presence of a Mr. Cobb, a smart and suave interviewer. Mr. Cobb was hopeful, Mr. Cobb was strenuous.

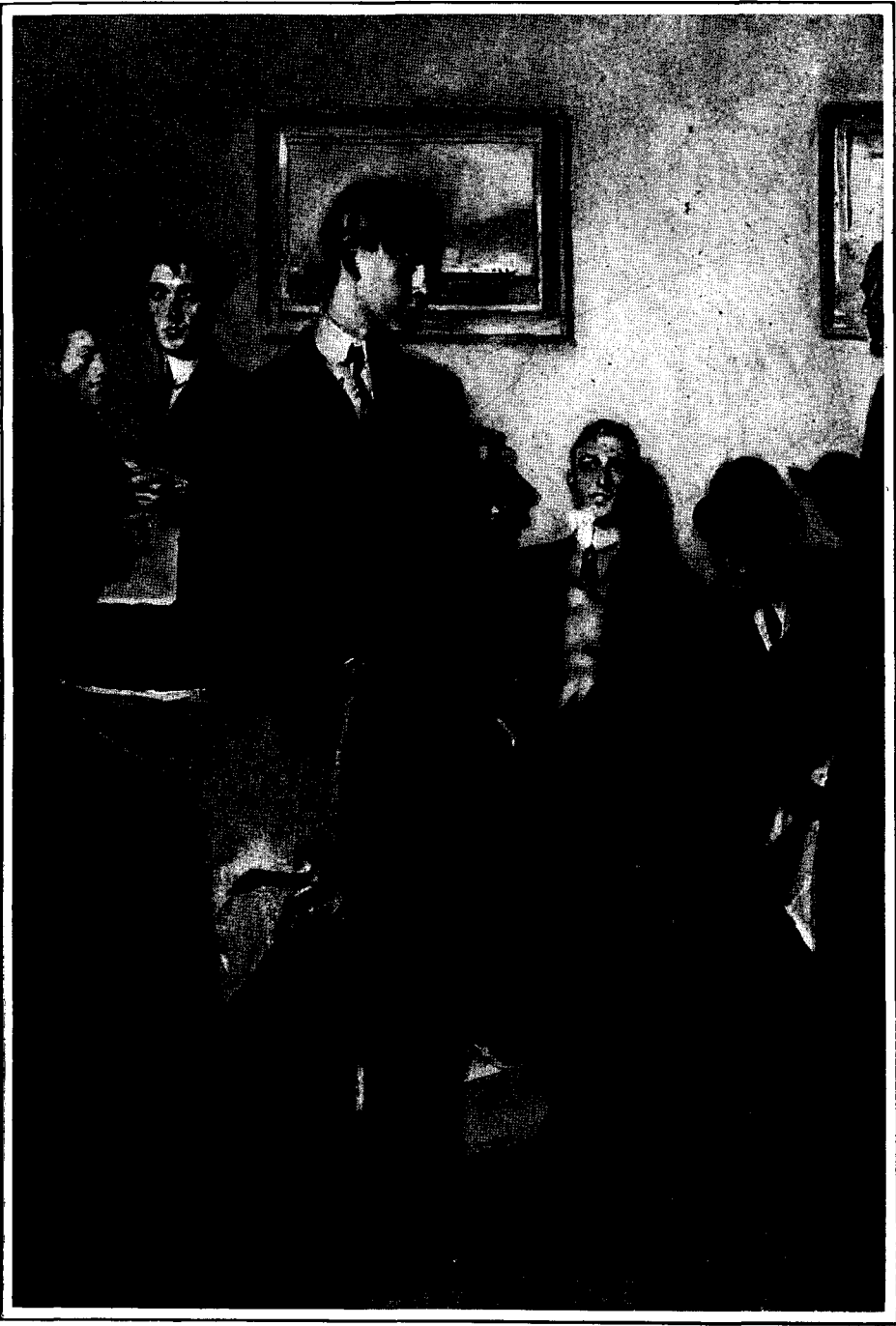
"Big Business can get cheap help—all it wants—but Big Business depends for its continuance on Brains—and Brains are at a premium, Mr.—ah—ah—Ferguson. It is our business to find the Brains, to put the right Man . . ." Truly an inspiring flow of formulas.

It seemed a privilege to sign the contract that called for ten per cent. of the first year's salary and to pay the five-dollar fee. Did it not mean that Edward was Brains?

Ten minutes later father and son stood out in the hall. It was a dramatic moment, the last prop was to be withdrawn, the vessel launched. Edward had a sensation of drowning, and his father felt a rush of pity and affection. He spoke huskily, grasping Edward's hand.

"You'd better wait here to-day, Ed. You don't want to miss the opportunity when it comes along. Just hang around till five this evening. Here's a dollar. Get your lunch at some dairy-place. So, now put on a brave front. I'll see you to-night."

Edward could say nothing. He grinned and flushed; but he felt the shameful tears rising when he saw his little father's back disappearing through the doorway. Now he was alone in the world, with his fortune to make—the loneliest and, withal, the most abashed boy in the city.



Drawn by John A. Williams

NOW HE WAS ALONE IN THE WORLD, WITH HIS FORTUNE TO MAKE

He sat down on a chair against the wall, dismally waiting for the rather dreadful opportunity.

After eight days Edward had a clearer notion of what he was. His father was plainly disappointed, his sister sharp in her growing scorn, and only his mother comforted him. Each day he arrived at nine sharp, and sat quietly till noon; took a hasty lunch, and returned until the office boy briskly put him out.

"Say, you, there's nothing doing. Gee! some folks is regular plants."

Ashamed to go home, Edward would wander the chilly streets, gazing in at the shop windows.

He began to have a feeling that he had been duped, that the Brain-Brokers had been chiefly concerned in getting the five-dollar fee, and had no intention of finding a place for him. For not only was there a scarcity of jobs, but all the opportunities went to quite a different class of young men. Contrasted with this class, Edward was a ragged urchin. For they were the Ready-Made Young Men, the youth of the land who heeded the uplifted forefinger of the Captain of Industry in the advertisement, "You Can Succeed"; they had about them an air of success, the alert eye and the strenuous manner, the polished shoes and fresh shirt, the shaved face and the close-cut hair. Their brisk exteriors seemed to be saying, "See, we are subservient, ready, bright, cheerful; we believe in 'Smile,' 'Do it Now,' 'I'm a hustling,' 'Nothing Succeeds Like the Appearance of Success.'" Who could resist these products of the commercial school and the correspondence course—these cheerful Americans?

Poor Edward, in his unmatched clothes—thin, sensitive boy, modest and unobtrusive! What chance had he?

And his waiting brought him a bitter inkling of the future. Edward had never done very well in school; it was after school-hours that he truly lived. It was when he was digging in the soil, tramping through distant woods, fishing in the sea, that he felt at home in the world. There was something untamed and savage in his nature, something akin to the instinct of honking geese in autumn skies; the keen outdoor

freshness that animals seem to lap up; the flavor of berries or sea-winds or sun on pine-needles. He desired to be a cell in the wild nerve of Nature, sharing every sting and thrill of the life of earth. To put such a lad in the city was to make him acutely self-conscious, repressed, shy. He knew now that he had given up his freedom and his true career, but he was helpless.

Then there came on the eighth afternoon such a torrent of rain through the darkening streets that the Ready-Made Young Men could not risk their new suits, and stayed at home. Edward sat alone in the lighted hall. He could hear the rain on the outside windows, and he was desolated by the sound.

All at once Mr. Cobb appeared, glancing eagerly. His gaze rested on Edward with exasperated disappointment, and he went back to his office. A moment later he reappeared, desperately scratching his head.

"Say," he began, "there's a hurry-call here. You're not just the man, but say, . . . it's a clerk-job down the Maxwell Steamship Co., Pier 9, foot of Rector Street. Say, how about making a bluff at it?"

Edward rose, his heart paining with excitement and dread. Had the ghastly opportunity found him?

"I could try," he murmured.

"Here's the slip. 'Phone if you get it. If you don't, say account the rain we were short, but to-morrow we'll send 'em a crackerjack. Ask for seven to start."

Edward took the slip and went. He walked, his old umbrella overhead, but his long trousers getting a dreary soaking. Only a few people were in the street, bumping one another in their hurry. Cars were lighted; truckmen sat aloft their trucks in oil-suits, the shop-windows were white with mist. It was a long walk to Rector Street, and then down the narrow, sloping by-way to the river. Pier 9 stood black in the rain, with lighted upper windows, and, beneath, huge stacks of covered cotton-bales and barrels of molasses. A south-going steamer was moored at the dock, and the longshoremen were rushing aboard a cargo of canned goods, shouting, hustling, and cursing. Trucks went

in and out. There was a smell of the sea, mixed with saloon smells and the sharp, sweet odor of molasses.

Edward's heart seemed to choke his throat as he ascended the boxed, white, rubber-sheathed steps to the second floor. The center was railed off square, with clerks on all four sides busy beneath electric bulbs, and on the sawdust floor stood a red-hot stove, very pleasant in the chill, wet weather. Edward stood timidly on this floor, not knowing what to do. A clerk beyond the near-by railing, working with his derby on and an unlit cigar in his mouth, happened to look up, and nodded affably.

Edward advanced and whispered incoherently:

"I'm from Atwood's."

"Atwood's?" The voice was pleasant. "They sent *you* for the job?" The clerk looked the incredulity he voiced; then he smiled reassuringly. "Never mind; I'll tell Mr. Ramsdell."

He arose and went behind the book-keeper's standing desk. Mr. Ramsdell emerged immediately, a short, red-haired man, with a ruddy face and reddish-black eyes. A green shade was over the eyes, and he wore a shining alpaca coat. His voice was curiously high and shrill, but he measured his words.

"You're from Atwood's?" He, too, looked incredulous, gazing over his glasses. "Well—come in."

He opened a wicker gate, and led Edward to the tall desk. Then leaned against it, hands clasped, like an interrogating magistrate. He eyed the slip.

"Edward Ferguson. . . . How old are you, Edward?"

The use of his first name was the one human touch in eight days. Edward warmed, relaxed, smiled. His thumping heart beat with greater ease.

"Fourteen."

"Fourteen! You're pretty young for this job. Never worked before, did you?"

"No, sir."

"Live at home with your folks?"

"In Brooklyn, with my father, my mother, and my sister."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a clerk with the express company."



HE BEGAN TO HAVE A FEELING THAT HE HAD BEEN DUPED

"Well, I want to see your handwriting. Just take this pen and paper and write me a letter asking for the job."

It was a hard test. Finally Edward wrote:

"MY DEAR MR. RAMSDELL,—I am a boy of fourteen, who has just finished school.

t's and dot the i's. You write too quickly. But then, I suppose you are nervous to-day. Of course, you're too young; but a fellow ought to have a chance. Suppose you come to-morrow morning at eight-thirty, and try it."

Edward stood rooted. It was unbelievable. He gasped—

"You mean—you'll try me?"

"Yes."

Fresh blood seemed to rush through him—a pulsing of militant music.

"And—" he muttered—"the salary?"

"Eight to start. Is that all right?"

Then Edward began his business career with true business acumen. He dissembled. Was eight all right when he was willing to take five or six?

"Oh yes," he murmured, "that would do for a start."

Mr. Ramsdell put a hand on the boy's shoulder, smiled paternally, and glanced at Edward over his glasses. It was, withal, a sweet and old-fashioned procedure.

"Then, Edward, you run home and tell the folks you've got your first job."

He did. The rain was fresh and cleansing; the crowded cars

were intimate with human warmth; the shining lights of the shops and offices kept calling out: "You belong, Edward; you're one of us; we've taken you in out of the cold." He felt alert, successful, important; he had independence now, and felt the first wave of manhood. He could see it all. Now he must have a key to the house; he must get new things for his room; he would pay board and have the right to come and go as he pleased; the gates of civilization were opening, and he could range at will into the dazzling



"ATWOOD'S? THEY SENT YOU FOR THE JOB?"

It is time for me to go to work. I want to help with the family. I am willing to work very hard, and even if I wouldn't know the work right away I would be glad to be shown. Will you give me a chance, and greatly oblige,

"Yours respectfully,

"ED. FERGUSON."

Mr. Ramsdell examined this document with care, and then smiled. But he spoke measuredly:

"You want to be careful to cross the

heart of the world. He hurried down the side street to the frame house, tramped up the steps, rang the bell. It was later than he thought; the family was at supper.

Fanny opened the door, the usual smirk on her face. Defiantly he brushed by her, entered the dining-room. His father and mother looked up, Fanny appeared in the doorway behind him. He waved his dripping umbrella.

"I've got a job," he cried.

Excitement filled the room.

"With the Maxwell Steamship Co., Pier 9, North River, foot of Rector Street."

His father and mother arose; the first was a gloating parent, reeking exultation, but the second was weeping at the appearance of this stranger before her.

"And the pay?" asked Old Ferguson.

"Eight—*eight*—eight dollars a week!"

"By damn!" cried Old Ferg, "I always knew the boy was a wonder."

But the validity of the miracle was established by Fanny. All she said was:

"Eddy, I'll warm up your supper for you. You must be half dead, and you're soaked through."

But her voice and look were merely a sign that Edward was at least potentially a man, and that she was a mere girl, taking second place.

It was a triumph, the beginning of grown-up life. And yet, subtly, Edward could feel that he was a wild-hearted creature caught in the strange industrial web of civilization. Under the triumph was a tiny doubt, a skepticism. Was this, after all, the life for him?